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Lauren Annette Bock

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**The Thesis Report Committee for Lauren Annette Bock
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**Dysfunctional Dynamics: The Characterization and Iconography of Three Tragic
Couples**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Lesley Dean-Jones

Adam Rabinowitz

**Dysfunctional Dynamics: The Characterization and Iconography of
Three Tragic Couples**

by

Lauren Annette Bock, B.A.,B.S.

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Abstract

Dysfunctional Dynamics: The Characterization and Iconography of Three Tragic Couples

Lauren Annette Bock, M.A.

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Supervisor: Lesley Dean-Jones

Medea, Phaedra, and Clytemnestra are three of the most well-known female characters from ancient tragedy. Each of these women underwent an evolution in characterization between the Greek and Roman periods, which affected how they were depicted by artists and perceived by audiences. While the transformation of each of these tragic wives was unique, the shift culminated in an increase of agency and autonomy for the women in the Roman traditions.

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Introduction

Medea, Phaedra, and Clytemnestra are three of the most fascinating and multifaceted women in ancient mythology. On the surface these women appear as murderesses, evil women who have broken away from the ideal stereotypical virtues expected of women in antiquity. However, a closer inspection of their various personae exposes complicated depths of characterization and reveals new and unexpected motivations for their crimes.

Aside from murder, these women share a myriad of traits. Each of these wives was neglected or betrayed by her spouse and this suffering led to an ardent desire for revenge, which compelled her to commit violent crimes. The deeds of these women have fascinated both ancient and modern audiences, causing many different versions of each of these royal women to appear in literature and art spanning the cultures of Classical Greece to late Imperial Rome.

I intend to investigate the Greek and Roman literary and artistic traditions of each of these women in order to prove that there was an evolution in how their characters were portrayed by authors and consequently a shift in how their natures were depicted by artists and interpreted by audiences. I propose that each wife underwent her own unique transformation, which culminates in an attribution of greater agency and autonomy in the Roman traditions than in the Greek.

Medea's reputation evolves from a fixation on her act of infanticide to a concentration on her experience as a betrayed wife and mother. The Classical Greek

tradition emphasizes her violent nature while the Romans empathize with her suffering, allowing her to be understood as a human being rather than a monster. Phaedra develops from a weak victim consumed by a passion that she considers shameful, into a woman who seeks revenge on a neglectful husband and boldly takes her desires into her own hands. Finally Clytemnestra, who has one of the most varied mythological traditions associated with her, is transformed from a political pawn, into a wife seeking revenge, into a queen ruthlessly seeking royal power in her own right. The powerful transformations of these remarkable women are complemented by the depictions of their husbands, which devolve from Greek heroes to men feminized and consistently lacking control of their families, kingdoms, emotions, and especially their dominant wives.

Chapter 1: The Metamorphoses of Medea and Jason

Introduction

Medea is one of the most complicated characters in ancient Greek mythology, a woman known for her suffering on account of spurned love, which drives her to commit heinous crimes in order to exact revenge on her enemies. It is no surprise that the misfortunes and violent deeds of this remarkable woman were often portrayed in art and even brought to life in theatrical performances. From Archaic Greece to the late Roman Empire the mythological tradition of Medea remained a thematic motif in visual culture, especially in funerary art.

In this chapter I will analyze visual renderings of Medea in relation to her literary tradition, exploring how ancient audiences viewed the Colchian princess. I propose that the plays of Euripides and Seneca impacted how respective Greek and Roman audiences received Medea and how artists chose to depict her. I will argue that the Romans interpreted Medea and her actions in a different light than the Greeks. The Romans go beyond simply casting judgment on Medea for her crimes and focus on the wrongs that she has suffered by emphasizing, in both literature and art, her hesitation to enact the final phase of revenge—infanticide. Meanwhile Jason experiences a feminization of his character, which is present in both Greek and Roman literature but only visible in Roman art.

Medea in Literature

Medea is an eastern princess from Colchis, the daughter of King Aeetes who is the son of Sol. As part of her divine lineage Medea has inherited magical powers and is skilled in implementing them. She falls in love with a Greek, Jason, who is a prince of Iolcos and has come to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece. Jason believes that if he obtains this valuable item he will regain the throne, which has been usurped by his uncle Pelias. Before obtaining the Fleece, Aeetes orders Jason to perform a myriad of impossible and deadly tasks, which would have killed him if Medea had not used her powers to help him succeed. Once Jason obtains the Fleece, he and Medea elope. Aeetes is irate and pursues the newlyweds but is slowed down when Medea kills her brother and scatters his limbs in the water. Back in Greece Pelias refuses to surrender the throne so Medea tricks his daughters into killing him, but the throne is inherited by his son Acastus. Jason and Medea flee to Corinth as exiles where Jason is warmly received by King Creon but Medea is banished by the ruler when he decides that Jason should marry his daughter, the princess Creusa.¹ This is the point where both Euripides and Seneca begin their plays.

Euripides' *Medea* was produced around 431 BCE. The playwright portrays Medea as a complex character. Both ancient and modern audiences are unsure how to feel about her: on the one hand we pity her and identify with her anger, but do not condone many of her crimes. Ancient and modern women can empathize with the

¹ Ahl, 1986, 37-8.

betrayal Medea suffered.² In lines 155-157, the chorus reveals that a man betraying his wife for another woman is commonplace: εἰ δὲ σὸς πόσις καὶνὰ λέχη σεβίζει/κείνῳ τόδε μὴ χαράσσου (If your husband honors the bed of another, don't get yourself worked up over it).³ Despite the fact that Medea is a foreigner the chorus, composed of Corinthian women, not only identifies with her but also attempts to console the abandoned wife, even referring to her as a friend in lines 178-179: μήτοι τό γ' ἐμὸν πρόθυμον/ φίλοισιν ἀπέστω (May my good will towards my friends never be absent). This friendly disposition towards Medea is reflected in Greek art in the Archaic period, which I will discuss in more detail in the following section.

After Euripides' iteration of the myth, which emphasizes Medea's murder of her children as the focal point of the tale, Medea's reputation deteriorates. Euripides casts Medea as a cold-hearted murderess. Immediately upon concocting her plans for revenge she settles on killing her children as a key phase in the plot [790-6]. Furthermore, unlike Seneca's Medea, Euripides' version scarcely wavers from her designs [1042-1044]. Another striking difference between the two tragedies is that, in Euripides, both children actually have a physical presence in the play. Medea's maternal interactions with her children and the fact that the audience not only hears them speak but beg for their lives humanizes them and makes their murders appear even more heinous and unacceptable [1040-1; 1271-9]:

φεῦ φεῦ· τί προσδέρκεσθέ μ' ὄμμασιν, τέκνα;
τί προσγελάτε τὸν πανύστατον γέλων;

² Sourvinou-Inwood, 1997, 257.

³ All translations are my own.

Alas! Why do you look at me like that children? Why do you smile at me, giggling for the last time?

ΠΑΙΣ ἰώ μοι...

Πα.^α οἴμοι, τί δράσω; ποῖ φύγω μητρὸς χέρας;

Πα.^β οὐκ οἶδ', ἀδελφεὲ φίλτατ'· ὀλλύμεσθα γάρ....

Πα.^α ναί, πρὸς θεῶν, ἀρήξατ'· ἐν δέοντι γάρ.

Πα.^β ὥς ἐγγὺς ἤδη γ' ἐσμὲν ἀρκύων ξίφους.

Children: Help!

First child: Oh, what can I do? How do I escape my own mother's hands?

Second child: I do not know, dear brother. For it looks like we are to die soon!

First child: Yes, dear God, stop it! Now is the time!

Second child: How close we are to the perils of the sword!

The dying words of Medea's children as she attacks them are heart-wrenching and stirring. The children's futile cries for mercy would have resonated with Euripides' audience, causing Medea's actions to seem excessively cruel.

In her book Euripides' *Medea*: The Incarnation of Disorder, Emily McDermott explores whether this infanticide scene is common to the Medea myth cycle or if it is a Euripidean invention and concludes that this deed seems to be specifically a fifth century if not Euripidean innovation.⁴ Before 430 BCE there were likely several versions of the myth including various ways in which Medea and Jason's children were killed. In one version, from seventh century BCE author Eumelus, Medea inadvertently kills her children when she attempts to give them immortality.⁵ In a second pre-Euripidean source, attributed to Creophylus, the children are murdered by angry Corinthian townspeople, which may even be alluded to in Euripides' version.⁶ In lines 1049-1065

⁴ McDermott, 1989, 6; 20.

⁵ McDermott, 1989, 9-11.

⁶ McDermott, 1989, 6; 9-11.

Medea contemplates her revenge and reveals that she refuses to leave her children vulnerable to her Corinthian enemies {1060-4]:

οὔτοι ποτ' ἔσται τοῦθ' ὅπως ἐχθροῖς ἐγὼ
παῖδας παρήσω τοὺς ἐμοὺς καθυβρίσαι.
πάντως σφ' ἀνάγκη καταθανεῖν· ἐπεὶ δὲ χρὴ,
ἡμεῖς κτενοῦμεν οἵπερ ἐξεφύσαμεν.
πάντως πέπρακται τὰῦτα κοῦκ ἐκφεύζεται·

I will never leave my children for my enemies to abuse! There is no question that they must die, and since they must, I who gave birth to them shall kill them.

If this excerpt is a conscious allusion to early adaptations of the myth, then it demonstrates that Euripides was familiar with a variety of scenarios that caused the children's death and, therefore, the inclusion of the infanticide scene as an act of violent revenge was a Euripidean invention. Literary evidence suggests that the premeditated murders of Medea's children "was not a known mythic variant before the fifth century."⁷ This Euripidean innovation was unique to Medea's mythological tradition and yet was highly influential on contemporary artists.

Just as Euripides' play had a profound (and seemingly negative) effect on Medea's reputation and iconography in ancient Greek art, Seneca's version exerted influence on how the Colchian princess was perceived by his ancient Roman audience and her subsequent depictions in Roman art. While I do not doubt that the Roman author was influenced and had extensive knowledge of Euripides' *Medea*, there is no question that "Senecan tragedy is vastly and intriguingly different from Greek tragedy."⁸ In his

⁷ McDermott, 1989, 11.

⁸ Ahl, 1986, 17.

introduction, Frederick Ahl provides a concise and vivid explanation of Seneca's characterization:

Seneca's characters are more introspective and self-analyzing than even a Sophoclean Ajax. Their most critical battles...are often those that they fight within themselves. Senecan drama constantly takes us beyond a character's words into his or her very thoughts, keeping us aware of the tension between what someone says and does and what the same person perceives as the reason for what is said and done. We see a character's hopes, illusions, and delusions played out before us.⁹

Although Ahl is referring to Seneca's characters in general, this description can accurately be applied specifically to his adaptation of Medea, highlighting the stark juxtaposition between the Euripidean and Senecan versions of the betrayed princess. I propose that Seneca's new treatment of Medea, which emphasizes her deeds of love and the deep confliction she feels over killing her children, influences a shift in how she was portrayed in art. This metamorphosis can be seen over a significant time span from Augustan period frescoes to late imperial sarcophagi.

First, I will address the key innovations in Seneca's rendering of Medea, which led to a transition towards a more sympathetic and positive reception of this complex and conflicted character. One notable difference between the two treatments of the myth is that, in Euripides, the Corinthian chorus sides with Medea and disapproves of Jason's betrayal [576-8], while Seneca's chorus is immediately against her. The unfriendly chorus enhances the sense that Medea is completely alone and abandoned in a foreign land and subsequently guides the audience to pity her. This hostility is evident in lines 114-15, as the chorus taunts Medea saying: *tacitis eat illa tenebris, si qua peregrino nubit furtiua marito* (Let her go in silent gloom, whoever flees her home to wed a foreign

⁹ Ahl, 1986, 18.

husband). Considering the fact that at this point in the play Medea has already been betrayed by her husband and banished from the realm by King Creon, these taunts seem unnecessarily cruel and may be meant to elicit sympathy early on from Seneca's audience, emotions which will inevitably grow deeper and more conflicted as the play goes on.

Another key difference is Medea's incessant focus on her "good" deeds. While Euripides' Medea does list all the ways she assisted Jason, Medea's declaration in Seneca is much more detailed and emotional. In her speech to Creon beginning at line 201 Medea goes into great detail explaining her efforts claiming, *decus illud ingens Graeciae et florem inclitum/...servasse memet* (All on my own did I save that great glory and illustrious flower of Greece) [226-8]. In her dialogue with Jason, Medea recounts the numerous times she saved his life while sacrificing her own, *quascumque aperui tibi vias, clausi mihi* (Every way I have opened for you, I have closed for myself) [458]. Medea also attempts to rationalize her transgressions: *et nullum scelus/ irata feci: saeuit infelix amor* (I committed no crime in anger; it is ill-omened love that stirred me) [135-6], a touching yet dangerous sentiment. While her argument is not exactly convincing, it highlights the blurred lines between love and hate, death and life, passion and grief and serves as a reminder to the audience that Medea had a partner in her crimes.

Medea in Art: From Murder to Meditation

It is remarkable that before Euripides' production of *Medea* around 431 BCE, images of Medea focused on her supernatural powers. She is often shown in vase paintings deceiving the daughters of Pelias and assisting Jason in accomplishing his

super-human endeavors.¹⁰ A black figure lekythos (figure 1) dating to around 530 BCE epitomizes this tendency. While the attribution of this image to Medea has been debated, an inscription identifying the figure as “Medeia” has been proved valid.¹¹ The imagery on the vase emphasizes Medea’s divinity and supernatural powers. Rather than showing her hurting others or committing evil deeds, the vase depicts a lone image of Medea’s face flanked by two snakes. This image is powerful and striking in that it focuses on her alone, likening her to a goddess. The snakes may be a reference to her divinity in an attempt to remind the viewer of her descent from Helios as reptiles are well-known for their chthonic symbolism in Greek art and religion.

After the production of Euripides’ *Medea* in 431 BCE there is a significant shift in how Medea is represented. Although scenes similar to those from previous periods do exist, such as Medea in Colchis, there are no Peliades vases dating to this period showing the daughters slaying their father.¹² However, the most important change in depictions of Medea is that scenes become very violent and concentrate on Medea killing her children. It is curious that, before Euripides, we do not have examples of this infanticide scene. Visual evidence seems to prove that Euripides’ tragedy had a significant impact on Medea’s image in art.

Before Euripides, renderings of Medea are for the most part non-violent, but after the playwright included Medea’s murder of her children in his version of the myth, she is

¹⁰ Sourvinou-Inwood, 1997, 266. See also Schefold, 1978, 100-6; Vojatzki, 1982, 94-100.

¹¹ Sourvinou-Inwood, 1997, 262, footnote 22.

¹² Sourvinou-Inwood, 1997, 266-9.

often shown in the act or having just slaughtered the two boys.¹³ An Apulian volute krater dating to around 330 BCE (figure 2) serves as an ideal example. The upper register of the krater reveals four gods flanking a *naiskos*, two on each side. On the left are Heracles and Athena; on the right are the Dioscuri (Castor and Pollux). While the presence of these particular gods may seem random, each divinity is related to Medea's mythological history in some way. Heracles was an Argonaut and, according to one myth, Medea used her powers to cure the madness that compelled him to kill his sons.¹⁴ Athena helped construct Jason's magical Argo and (along with Hera) served as a patron goddess for the journey. The half-brothers Castor and Pollux were also fellow Argonauts of Jason. Castor is mortal and Pollux is immortal. When Castor dies Pollux prays to Zeus to share his immortality with his brother so the two spend alternate days in Hades and Olympus.¹⁵ The two brothers are significant both in their liminality and because they are two boys, recalling Medea's two sons.

None of the divinities seem to be particularly interested in the chaotic scene in the central *naiskos*; only Athena looks on with nonchalant curiosity. The *naiskos* is the focal point of the scene, depicting a distraught Creon and his dead or dying daughter Creusa. On the left of the middle register an unidentified woman reaches for Creon and to her left is an older male figure, identified by an inscription as a *paidagogos*, accompanied by a younger female.¹⁶ To the right of the *naiskos* Creusa's brother Hippotes reaches in an

¹³ Even the Peliades scenes, which depict an accidental murder, are not violent since they focus on Medea's deception and divine powers and it is the daughters (not Medea) who physically commit the act.

¹⁴ Sourvinou-Inwood, 1997, 279.

¹⁵ Ahl, 1986, 103.

¹⁶ Sourvinou-Inwood, 1997, 272-3.

attempt to tear the poisonous crown from his sister's head; next to him stands an older woman (possibly their mother?). To the right of this woman, occupying a precarious position between the middle and lower registers, is the ghost of Medea's father, Aeetes. His eastern costume differentiates him from the Greek characters and highlights his foreignness. His presence in the scene is unique and alludes to Medea's earlier betrayals.¹⁷ Finally in the lower register, a young man bearing a spear attempts to protect one of Medea's young boys while watching her violently slaughter the other at an altar. The scene is quite graphic in that Medea wields a sword while grabbing the hair of the child who protests with flailing limbs. Like her father, Medea is dressed in elaborate eastern garb, symbolizing her otherness as she commits such a barbarous act. Medea's costume is also significant because before 431 BCE she is never shown wearing eastern clothing but the majority of images dating to after 431 usually depict her in these foreign garments. This may be an indication that Euripides costumed Medea in eastern clothing in his production, or it may be a result of how foreigners were depicted after the Persian Wars.¹⁸ The central male figure observes Medea's act while wielding two torches and driving Medea's dragon-drawn chariot. The inscription identifies the figure as *oistros*, "the personification of madness or frenzy."¹⁹ To the right of *oistros* a bearded Jason looms towards Medea in vain, waving a spear and sword.

There is no doubt that the scene on this krater is more violent than those before 431 BCE. Not only do we see two of Medea's murders in progress (Creusa and the child)

¹⁷ Sourvinou-Inwood, 1997, 272-3.

¹⁸ For further discussion on Medea and the significance of eastern costume see Sourvinou-Inwood, 1997, 272-3; 289-293.

¹⁹ Ondine Pache, 2004, 35.

but in Aeetes' ghost we also have reference to her fatal deeds in Colchis. If, as I propose, this shift is due to the impact of Euripides' tragedy, we must ask why the image includes aspects not found in the Greek play. Both Sourvinou-Inwood and Ondine Pache address this issue. First, there is no evidence to support that the vase painter intended to portray a specific scene from the play. Sourvinou-Inwood prefers to describe the image as the painter's own "particular articulation of the myth"²⁰ as evidenced by the existence of the gods who do not appear in Euripides but are connected to the life of Medea nonetheless. Although the presence of other characters such as Aeetes and Hippotes further demonstrate that the artist was not trying to recreate a scene from Euripides' production, but rather explore the construction of Medea's character through "shifting relationships."²¹ The playwright's influence can be seen in the portrayal of Medea's violent actions as they happen and the allusion to her divine flight.²²

Given that Seneca portrays a more pitiable Medea, we must ask to what extent this characterization could have influenced a contemporary audience. There is no evidence to suggest that Seneca's plays were produced on as large a scale as those in Classical Athens, but if put on even for a small or elite audience they could have been quite influential and well known. It is likely that Seneca's version of Medea contributed to a cultural and artistic transition, a shift from visually identifying Medea solely by her heinous acts of violence to zeroing in on the betrayed wife's fragile emotional state.²³

²⁰ 1997, 272.

²¹ Sourvinou-Inwood, 1997, 273.

²² This krater is a prime example for its depiction of Medea's violence but several vases survive that also show similar scenes of violence. Ondine Pache, 2004, 25-34 details six more extant examples.

²³ Ahl, 1986, 19.

Artists began to emphasize Medea's contemplation of revenge rather than focusing on the act itself.

This shift in perspective is illustrated in many surviving frescoes from Pompeii and Herculaneum, all of which "show a very stern Medea, holding a sword and contemplating murder."²⁴ One such fresco, in particularly good condition, comes from the 'House of the Dioscuri' in Pompeii (figure 3). The house was named for the frescoes featuring Castor and Pollux found in the fauces. The villa is notable for its exquisite fourth style wall paintings, which date to around 64-79 CE (well after Seneca's play was believed to be written/produced).²⁵ The painting shows a pensive Medea regally dressed in purple and gold garments. The fact that the artist did not opt to portray her in barbaric eastern costume provides an immediate indication that an alienation of Medea from the viewer was not the artist's purpose. Medea is the focal point of the painting as she stares listlessly off into the distance while concealing her deadly weapon. This painting embodies the artistic shift in that it depicts Medea's contemplation of the killings and indicates, just as Seneca does, that the mother is torn between love and revenge. Despite the knowledge that the ultimate act of Medea's revenge will culminate in the murder of her children, it is difficult as a viewer not to empathize with or at least be concerned by the precarious mental state that leads to this decision.

After learning that she has succeeded in killing Creusa and Creon, Medea realizes that she is losing her nerve to complete the second half of her revenge: *quid, anime,*

²⁴ Ondine Pache, 2004, 37.

²⁵ Ling, 1991, 80; 125.

cessas? sequere felicem impetum (Spirit, why do you hesitate? The attack was successful, follow it up!) [895]. Fearing that she has lost her courage, Medea reprimands herself for feeling satisfied after only accomplishing a portion of her planned revenge and attempts to motivate her spirit: *incumbe in iras teque languentem excita/ penitusque ueteres pectore ex imo impetus uiolentus hauri* (Bend to your anger and rouse yourself from hesitation, give way to instinctive violence, let that former passion be drawn out from the depths of your heart) [902-4]. The next part of Medea's monologue represents the epitome of a conflicted mind as her mood changes from paragraph to paragraph [924-5; 927-8; 934; 936]:

liberi quondam mei,/ vos pro paternis sceleribus poenas date.

Children once mine, you pay for your father's crimes

ira discessit loco/ materque tota coniuge expulsa redit.

Anger has yielded its place, the wife has been expelled and the mother returns

Occidant, non sunt mei

Let them die, they are not mine

Sunt innocentes— fateor

But they are innocent, yes I admit it

To the left of Medea in the fresco, the two children sit playing while their *paidagogos* watches from behind. The structure the children sit upon resembles an altar, alluding to the similar architectural feature present in figure 2. Seneca's play stresses that the killing of Medea's children serves as a sacrifice. This is evident when, as she kills the first child, she exclaims, *victima manes tuos/ placamus ista* ([O brother] With this victim

I appease your ghost) [970-1]. Later when she speaks her final words to her former husband, she declares [982-4]:

*Iam iam recepi sceptrum germanum patrem,
spoliumque Colchi pecudis auratae tenent;
rediere regna, rapta uirginitas redit.*

Now I have recovered my royal status, my brother, my father,
And the Colchians have the spoils of the Golden Fleece;
My kingdom has been returned, my stolen virginity restored.

The fact that Seneca chooses to focus on Medea's contemplation and understate the actual murder is further evident in the fact that the children in Seneca don't have a voice. In Euripides, we hear the children plead to their mother not to hurt them, which humanizes them and personalizes the act. Seneca's voiceless children, on the other hand, remain as distant from the audience as a sacrificial animal does to a crowd attending a religious festival.

Seneca portrays Medea as wracked with doubt, which invokes a similar conflicted feeling in her audience. The House of the Dioscuri fresco seems to elicit the same emotions about Medea, as it depicts her "sterner, sadder, and alone as she premeditates her crime."²⁶ Corinne Ondine Pache provides a succinct summary to my argument:

These accounts emphasize the combination of opposite emotions in Medea...As on the extant wall paintings, Medea, holding her sword, is just about to kill her children; but the actual murder is not depicted: poised between action and in action, Medea half acquiesces and half denies wishing to both save and kill her children.²⁷

Images of Medea were not uncommon for decoration of Roman sarcophagi, with fourteen surviving examples from the second century CE alone.²⁸ Although these sarcophagi

²⁶ Ondine Pache, 2004, 37.

²⁷ Ondine Pache, 2004, 37.

²⁸ Zanker, 2004, 354.

show Medea in a variety of actions they do not display Medea in the midst of a violent act. The iconography of the sarcophagi does not vary drastically, tending to adhere to four basic scenes of the myth: 1) Medea's children presenting poisonous gifts to Creusa, 2) Creon distressed as his daughter is consumed by flames, 3) Medea observing her children while contemplating their murders, 4) Medea escaping in a serpent-drawn chariot.²⁹ The Berlin Sarcophagus of 150 CE is a prime example of this trend (figure 4).

The scene, read from left to right, displays a semi-nude Jason looking on as his two sons present Medea's cursed gifts to Creusa. Zanker identifies these gifts as not only representing Medea's poisoned garments, but as also signifying bridal gifts. He associates the wreath, flowers, garments, bridal bed, and the fatal flames as recalling aspects of the Roman wedding.³⁰ As the scene shifts to the right Jason appears again, draping his hand over Creusa's in an affectionate clasp.³¹ This gesture is reminiscent of the *dextrarum iunctio*, the mutual handclasp of marriage, which is also frequently depicted on sarcophagi as a reflection of marital harmony.³² This nuptial Jason calmly looks to the right, as Creon is distraught at the sight of his beloved daughter being consumed by Medea's poisonous flames. The figure of Creusa is evocative in the amount of emotion she shows as the flames rise from her scalp, her movement and sinuous drapery mimic Medea's serpents present at the end of the narrative. Next to Creusa a calm Medea observes her children as she premeditates their murder. Her arm (now broken) held a dagger angled in such a way that it looks like Creusa will run right

²⁹ Gessert, 2004, 228.

³⁰ Zanker, 2004, 355-6.

³¹ Zanker, 2004, 355.

³² Hersch, 2010, 205-212.

into it.³³ The final scene depicts Medea fleeing in her divine, serpent-drawn chariot with the body of one of her children flung over her shoulder. Although the scene absolutely does not portray Medea as innocent and alludes to her many crimes, it adheres to the trend begun in the early empire in that it is less graphic in its violence and does not depict the actual act of Medea stabbing her children.

Jason

Although there is a stark contrast between Greek and Roman depictions of Medea in art and literature, both traditions assign a certain level of control to the demigoddess, who consistently manipulates situations where men think they have the upper hand (i.e. her encounters with Creon and Jason). Once Medea decides upon revenge, she immediately assumes an elevated position and takes away any power Jason once held. Jason is feminized for this lack of control in both Euripides and Seneca but, despite this fact, Greek artists chose to represent Jason as the brave Argonaut highlighting his virile deeds and heroic exploits. Conversely, Roman art, namely the Berlin Sarcophagus, picks up on and clearly portrays this de-masculinization.

In his paper *Medea's Exit: Dramatic Necessity through Inverted Ritual*, Eric Dodson-Robinson addresses this feminization of Jason and argues that the entire play of Euripides represents an inverted marriage ritual with Jason cast in the role of “the unwitting and feminized participant.”³⁴ He asserts that the infanticide represents a perverted and horrific version of *proteleia*. It was necessary that young, Greek brides-to-

³³ Zanker, 2004, 356.

³⁴ 2015, 1.

be offer *proteleia* sacrifices “as a penalty for the impending loss of their virginity.”³⁵

Medea’s sacrifice of her children in order to regain her virginal status is an exaggerated form of the *proteleia* ritual as typical offerings included hair, toys, and dolls.³⁶ Dodson-Roberts points to Jason’s futile attempts to save his children as feminine, citing a component of the wedding ritual that included an attempted “rescue” of the bride: “the role Jason plays in his heroic attempt feminizes him, as it is women who attempt the mock rescue in the traditional γαμος.”³⁷

Medea’s infamous flight in a chariot parallels the transport of bride and groom in a chariot during the wedding procession. The chariot would have been strictly an aristocratic vehicle; it held divine connotations, elevating the status of the newlyweds, but Medea completely reverses this nuptial ritual. Typically the groom would have provided the chariot to convey the bride to her new home—but Medea provides her own chariot and conveys herself away from Jason. In acquiring her divine chariot, Medea elevates herself above Jason in status and power.³⁸ This feminization of Jason can similarly be seen in Seneca. In line 444, Jason says, *constituit animus precibus iratam aggredi* (My mind is fixed to assail her wrath with prayers). Not only does this excerpt highlight Jason’s feeble status, but also casts him in the feminine role of suppliant which was just occupied by Medea when she feigns supplication to Creon in order to secure the opportunity to exact her revenge [179-300].

³⁵ Dodson-Roberts, 2015, 2.

³⁶ Dodson-Roberts, 2015, 2-3.

³⁷ 2015, 3.

³⁸ Dodson-Roberts, 2015, 1.

While artistic representations of Jason are copious and varied in theme, Greek art emphasizes Jason's heroic deeds and adventures. Every Greek image in the LIMC displays Jason's exploits, highlighting his accomplishments along the Argonauts' journey for the Golden Fleece. Even in the three Greek vase paintings that depict Medea's triumphant revenge and subsequent flight in her chariot, Jason's masculinity is illustrated in his heroic nudity and through the weapon that he brandishes at his (ex) wife (figure 5).

Although there are extant Roman images illustrating events that occurred before the couple arrived in Corinth (Jason's arrival at Iolcos, endeavors for the Fleece, flight from Colchis, even an image of Medea and Jason's wedding) I argue that, as a result of Seneca's tale, the Romans viewed Jason differently—feminized. While Medea's visual makeover in Roman art consisted of a shift away from violence, Jason's feminization was portrayed consistently in scenes of the events in Corinth. I will focus on the Berlin sarcophagus (figure 4) as a key piece of evidence since it is similar to other sarcophagi illustrating the scene and therefore representative of the iconographic tradition (on sarcophagi) in the first and second centuries CE.

Jason enters the scene as the first image on the left, leaning his arm on a pillar and barely clothed in a precariously draped garment. Next, he appears in the center of the panel dressed in a virile, military chlamys but has curiously laid down his weapons. His helmet lay at his feet while his shield perches on the ground behind him. This abandonment of weapons symbolizes an act of submission or surrender. At first glance it looks like Jason wields a spear but upon closer inspection, it is actually the spear of the young man standing behind him. Instead, Jason grasps a corner of the fabric from his

cloak in a very feminine pose almost as if to avoid or protect himself from the chaotic messiness in the scene next to him. Jason's feminization is also indicated by the inactivity of his poses. Jason literally stands doing nothing as his new bride suffers a torturous death. Jason looks aloof and feminine in comparison to nearby Creon who desperately tries to save his daughter.

Conclusion

An examination of Medea iconography from mid-sixth century BCE Greece to mid-second century CE Rome reveals that the plays of Euripides and Seneca affected how their respective communities interpreted and depicted the abandoned wife. While the demigoddess seems to have been honored in the Archaic period as a powerful sorceress (evidenced by figure 1 and three contemporary black figure lekythoi that also depict this particular image³⁹), once Euripides ascribes infanticide to his version of her character this violent act becomes the foremost attribute featured in vase painting after 431 BCE. Seneca's treatment of Medea, while different than Euripides', had just as much of an impact on Roman audiences and artisans. Whereas for the Greeks Medea is iconic for the act of killing her children, for the Romans she was portrayed only contemplating the deed, attributing depth to her character by acknowledging her suffering. Medea's emergence as victor is complimented by Jason's feminization. Although Jason assumes a feminine role in both Greek and Roman literature, Greek artists ignore his flaws and consistently depict the former prince as a courageous hero

³⁹ Sourvinou-Inwood, 1997, 262.

while Roman artists recognize the duality in Jason's character and exhibit it in their work through iconographic feminization.

Chapter 2: Phaedra, Theseus, and Hippolytus: Characterization Unveiled

Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the family dynamics of Phaedra, Theseus, and Hippolytus. I intend to examine how the characterization of each individual evolves from Euripides' fifth century BCE play *Hippolytus* through Seneca's first century CE version *Hippolytus/Phaedra*. As with the characterizations of Medea and Jason, I will argue that there is a visible shift in artistic representations of the tragedy between the Greek and Roman periods, which can be traced to the respective literary representations of each culture.

Phaedra in Literature

I will begin with the characterization of Phaedra. Euripides' *Hippolytus* was produced in 429 BCE⁴⁰ and recounts the tragic events resulting from Phaedra's illicit love for her stepson Hippolytus. The main action of the play is initiated by Aphrodite, who has decided to use and manipulate Phaedra as a means of punishing Hippolytus for blaspheming the goddess and turning his back on love and sex [10-15]. Euripides constructs Phaedra as weakened and tormented by her desire—an unfortunate and feeble victim of her circumstances. When the audience first meets Phaedra, her frailty is apparent. She enters the scene with her nurse and addresses her attendants [198-202]:

αἵρετέ μου δέμας, ὀρθοῦτε κάρα·
λέλυμαι μελέων σύνδεσμα φίλων.
λάβετ' εὐπήχεις χεῖρας, πρόπολοι.

⁴⁰ Roche 1998, 45.

βαρύ μοι κεφαλῆς ἐπίκρανον ἔχειν·
ἄφελ', ἀμπέτασον βόστρυχον ὤμοις.

Lift my body, raise up my head.
Friends, the muscles of my limbs are so weak.
Maidens, hold my beautiful arms and hands.
This tiara weighs heavily on my head;
Take it off, let my hair spread out over my shoulders.

After uttering a frantic speech about a sudden longing to be riding, hunting, and adventuring in the wilderness a mortified Phaedra regrets her words and displays true virtue as she hides herself and her shame underneath a veil—a gesture of pure modesty [243-5]: μαῖα, πάλιν μου κρύψον κεφαλὴν./ αἰδούμεθα γὰρ τὰ λελεγμένα μοι./ κρύπτε· (Nurse, cover my head again. I am ashamed of what I've mouthed. Cover it). Her frenzied emotional state emerges through her constantly changing mind: one second she wants to be inside, then she wants fresh air; she is too weak to move, then imagines riding and hunting in nature; she wants her hair bound up and veiled, then loose and flowing; and finally she contemplates suicide [176-249]. Phaedra is distressed and ashamed of her lovesickness, which she considers madness, and would rather die than betray her husband and forfeit her virtue. In this version of the tragedy it is the nurse who takes the initiative to reveal her mistress' passions to Hippolytus and once the queen learns of the betrayal she resolves to commit suicide. However, before she dies, a spurned Phaedra seeks revenge for Hippolytus' rejection and leaves a note for Theseus accusing her stepson of rape. Once Theseus reads the message he is sent into a violent rage and immediately invokes a curse that causes Hippolytus' death.

Roman literature depicts Phaedra as stronger, more outspoken, and in greater control of her fate. This shift can be seen in Ovid's *Heroides 4*, where a determined

Phaedra writes a letter to Hippolytus revealing her love and deepest desires. It is interesting that, after a warm greeting, Phaedra makes a point to entreat her stepson to read the entire letter [3]: *perlege, quodcumque est—quid epistula lecta nocebit?* (Read to the end, whatever is here—what will reading of a letter harm?). Why would Phaedra find it necessary to ask this favor from her stepson and ensure the entire letter is read? Perhaps this statement is an ironic reference to the false letter in Euripides that led to Hippolytus' death. If this is the case, then from the very beginning of Ovid's poem Phaedra differs from Euripides' character as she boldly references her Greek counterpart's fatal transgression.

Phaedra is also more outspoken; instead of relying on her nurse to expose her passions, she does so in her own words. Phaedra describes her love for Hippolytus unapologetically saying [11], *quidquid Amor iussit, non est contemnere tutum* (Whatever love commands it is not safe to ignore). Phaedra proposes an explanation for her feelings suggesting [53-4], *forsitan hunc generis fato reddamus amorem, / et Venus ex tota gente tributa petat* (It may be that this love is a debt I must pay due to the fate of my lineage, and that Venus is exacting tribute from me for my entire line) and goes on to recount the shameful lust of her mother and her sister's tragic love for Theseus [63], *placuit domus una duabus* (One house has won both sisters). In Ovid, Phaedra is not portrayed as a naïve victim, rather a woman who has given herself over to love.

Phaedra goes on to justify her passion by citing mythological unions in an attempt to convince Hippolytus to apply his love and passion for nature to her. Phaedra mentions the love of Cephalus and Aurora, Venus and Adonis, and Tydeus and Atalanta—all of

these men possessed a passion for the hunt equal to Hippolytus but eventually yielded to a woman because [102] *si Venerem tollas, rustica silva tua est* (If you take away love, the forest is a rustic place).

Unlike Phaedra in Euripides, whose guilt is compounded by the fact that she is betraying a pious Theseus who has served as a loving and dutiful husband, Ovid's Phaedra accuses Theseus of being neglectful and lays out his sins in order to demonstrate to Hippolytus that his father is undeserving of her love and his loyalty. First, he has abandoned his marital bed and duties [111-12]: *praeosuit Theseus.../Pirithoum Phaedrae Pirithoumque tibi* (Theseus prefers Pirithous over Phaedra, over [Hippolytus]). He killed her brother the Minotaur, abandoned her sister on an island, and killed Hippolytus' mother without marrying her leaving Hippolytus illegitimate and unworthy of ascending to the throne. Euripides' Phaedra never hints at Theseus' questionable deeds, but Ovid's version refuses to ignore them and exposes Phaedra's resentment of her husband.

Seneca paints a similar picture of Phaedra as stronger and more forthright. Unlike the Theseus in *Heroides 4*, Seneca's version did marry Hippolytus' mother—although it is important to keep in mind that he also killed her and has been away from Phaedra for four years on an adventure with Pirithous. Early on we see that Phaedra is justified in her resentment of Theseus—she has been abandoned by her husband and has no idea if she will ever lay eyes on him again. When Phaedra first appears in the play she immediately addresses Theseus' desertion [91-2], *profugus en coniunx abest/praestatque nuptae quam solet Theseus fidem* (Behold, as a fugitive Theseus abandons his marriage bed and honors

his nuptials in the manner that he is accustomed to). As in Ovid, Phaedra is not an unknowing victim since she recognizes her desire as a curse from Venus [124-7]:

*Stirpem perosa Solis invisi Venus
Per nos catenas vindicat Martis sui
Suasque, probis omne Phoebeum genus
Onerat nefandis.*

Venus, detesting the race of the hated Sun,
Seeks vengeance through us for the chains binding her to Mars,
So she loads the entire race of Phoebus with unspeakable shame.

In Seneca, Phaedra is less ashamed and is simply resigned to misfortunes in love that are of no fault of her own [186-7]: *hic volucer omni pollet in terra impotens/laesumque flammis torret indomitis Iovem* (This winged god is a powerful ruler throughout the earth and he inflames Jove himself, wounded with unquenched fires).

One key difference in the stories of Euripides and Seneca is that, in Seneca (as in Ovid) Phaedra reveals her passions to Hippolytus herself instead of relying on a third party. At line 585 Phaedra approaches Hippolytus and faints; he rushes to her side and holds her in his arms—an action that grants them a closeness and intimacy not found in Euripides. Phaedra confesses her love and provides reasons for succumbing to desires that are understandable and realistic. She mentions Theseus' aging looks, reminding the audience that the king was actually much older than Phaedra; it is reasonable to believe that Phaedra was closer in age to Hippolytus than Theseus. Hippolytus is aghast at Phaedra's admission and exclaims that he actually envies his father for his stepmother, Medea, despite her attempt on Theseus' life [695-7]. In spite of Medea's past crimes of murdering her two sons, her brother Absyrtos, Creusa, Creon, and attempting to murder Theseus, Hippolytus is so disgusted with Phaedra's admission of her desires that he

accuses her of being worse than the Colchian princess. After Hippolytus' rejection and Phaedra's fatal accusation of rape, the queen is consumed with guilt and ultimately reveals the truth of Hippolytus' innocence to Theseus before finally committing suicide [1159-1200]. Despite her sins, Phaedra admits to her crimes and becomes a sympathetic and redeemable character.

Phaedra and Medea are very similar women in that both share divine lineage from the Sun, kill/attempt to kill children/stepchildren, feed off of revenge, and are notorious for the instability of their moods and constantly changing mental states. However, while Medea's iconography shifts from violent filicide to contemplative, grieving mother, Phaedra evolves from being depicted as a weak victim into a strong, accepting, and willing participant to her passions.

Phaedra in Art: A Shifting Gaze

The typical images of Phaedra in Greek art depict her as weak, forlorn, and lovesick. A mid-fourth century BCE Apulian krater (figure 6), currently housed in the British Museum, is a typical rendering of this iconographical trend. On the upper register of side A, a suffering Phaedra sits veiled and with her head down, reminiscent of Euripides' version who barely has the strength to move.⁴¹ Phaedra is plagued by the floating Eros, while her concerned nurse stands nearby. This vase clearly represents Euripides' production. The visual presence of the gods show Phaedra as a helpless

⁴¹ This calyx-krater is attributed to the Laodamia painter. The lower register of side A displays a battle of Lapiths and Centaurs with Perithous and Theseus as heroes; British Museum, number 1870,0710.2.

victim to their whims and the prominence of the nurse emphasizes her vital role in Euripides' version of events.

There is an evolution in the depictions of Phaedra in Roman art, likely influenced by the works of Ovid and Seneca. Figure 7 is a fresco from room E of the House of Jason at Pompeii. The fresco illustrates Phaedra handing over a letter to her nurse, which will be conveyed to Hippolytus. This image is interesting in that it does not display a scene from either Euripides' or Seneca's plays. In Euripides' portrayal Phaedra has already committed suicide when Theseus discovers the letter on her body and in Seneca Phaedra reveals her feelings to Hippolytus face to face. I suggest that this fresco is actually a visual representation of Ovid's *Heroides 4* and that the image represents the letter, written by Ovid's Phaedra, being given to the nurse to be delivered to Hippolytus.

A fragmentary fresco (figure 8) is believed to originate from Pompeii and may portray Phaedra with her nurse.⁴² If this identification is correct, then the rendering adheres to the trend of Roman literature by depicting a Phaedra who brazenly gazes straight out at the viewer. Phaedra's frontal gaze and direct eye contact is almost off-putting and is in stark contrast to the victimized Phaedra of Greek art. This Phaedra is neither suffering nor weak. In Greek works Phaedra can barely hold her head up—not so in this painting. Her rigid posture indicates strength and her expression reveals no hint of shame. This audacious Phaedra clearly coincides with her counterparts in Roman literature and, in my opinion, specifically references Seneca's version. Figures 9 and 10 illustrate two more representations of Phaedra and support this trend. Figure 9 is a silver

⁴² British Museum, number 1856,0625.5; LIMC, 1994, 357, entry 12.

cup discovered as part of the hoard known as the ‘Seuso Treasure’ and dates to around the late fourth or early fifth century CE.⁴³ The image shows a seated Phaedra holding her head up high and boldly making eye contact with her audience. The opposite side of the cup shows Hippolytus embarking (or possibly just returning) from the hunt surrounded by his horse and hunting dogs.⁴⁴ Figure 10 represents a late second or early third century CE fresco that currently rests in the Vatican Library. The painting illustrates Phaedra standing up and staring straight out at the viewer. She is identified by the inscription near her shoulder that reads “*FEDRA*” and by the rope she grips in her right hand, which may foreshadow her imminent suicide.⁴⁵

Even more remarkable is the appearance of Phaedra and Hippolytus together, for which there is no extant model in Greek art. Figure 11 is a second century CE mosaic from the House of Dionysus at Paphos. A winged Eros floats nearby as Phaedra reveals her feelings to her stepson in a letter, which Hippolytus holds in his right hand, alluding to Ovid’s poem. However, the fact that Hippolytus and Phaedra are alone in the scene is also a direct reference to Seneca’s version and highlights a closeness and intimacy not present in Euripides. Two frescoes (figs. 12, 13) from Herculaneum and Pompeii display similar scenes in which a heroically nude Hippolytus stands next to a seated Phaedra. Similar to the other depictions, although Phaedra is clearly consumed by her love of Hippolytus, she is not physically weakened by her passions as she is in Greek art. Furthermore, although the couple is not alone in the frescoes (attended by the nurse and a

⁴³ For more on the ‘Seuso Treasure’ and the controversy surrounding the hoard see Z. Mrav, M. Dagi 2014.

⁴⁴ LIMC, 1994, 357, entry 14.

⁴⁵ LIMC, 1994, 358, entry 19.

male servant), the fact that the couple is in the same room and experiencing some sort of face-to-face interaction is reminiscent of Seneca's tragedy.

Theseus

In the previous section I have touched on the variations in the personality and motivations of Theseus in Euripides, Ovid, and Seneca. In Euripides, Theseus is a devoted husband who is absent from his beloved wife for honorable reasons, hinted at by Aphrodite in the prologue [34-7]:

ἐπεὶ δὲ Θησεὺς Κεκροπίαν λείπει χθόνα,
μῖασμα φεύγων αἵματος Παλλαντιδῶν...
ἐνιαυσίαν ἔκδημον αἰνέσας φυγῆν

Since Theseus left the land of Cecrops,
Fleeing the guilt for the murder of the sons of Pallas...
Submitting to exile abroad for one year

According to the goddess, Theseus is away due to a self-imposed exile as a ritualistic cleansing for past deeds. Upon his return home Theseus gives even more detail concerning the nature of his journey, explaining that he has journeyed home straight from the oracle θεωρὸν ἀξιοῖ δόμος [792]. Euripides constructs Theseus as pious and only absent in order to pay respect and penance to the gods. In contrast to Euripides, the Roman authors depict the king as selfish and violent. In both Ovid and Seneca Theseus has deserted Phaedra to join in the adventures of his comrade Pirithous. However, there is one key aspect of Theseus' characterization that remains consistent in both Greek and Roman literature; he is feminized in his impulsive and irrational decision to kill his son.

In Euripides, after reading Phaedra's letter, Theseus immediately condemns Hippolytus by employing one of three curses allotted him by Poseidon [887-9], ἀλλ', ὦ

πάτερ Πόσειδον, ἄς ἐμοί ποτε/ ἄρας ὑπέσχου τρεῖς, μιᾷ κατέργασαι/ τούτων ἐμὸν παῖδ’

(Father Poseidon, once you promised me three curses, with one of them, destroy my son).

Despite the warnings of the chorus and the entreaties of Hippolytus for a fair trial,

Theseus intends to destroy his son in any way possible [893-8]:

καὶ πρὸς γ’ ἐξελῶ σφε τῆσδε γῆς,
δυοῖν δὲ μοίραιν θατέραι πεπλήξεται·
ἢ γὰρ Ποσειδῶν αὐτὸν εἰς Ἄϊδου δόμους
θανόντα πέμψει τὰς ἐμὰς ἄρας σέβων
ἢ τῆσδε χώρας ἐκπεσὼν ἀλώμενος
ξένην ἐπ’ αἶαν λυπρὸν ἀντλήσει βίον.

And I will add this, I will drive him from this land,
And he will be stricken with one of two dooms;
For either Poseidon (honoring my prayers) having killed him will send him to Hades’
halls,
Or banished from this land, wandering on foreign soil he will endure a wretched life.

This rash decision does not coincide with that of a strong king and Artemis harshly reprimands him for ψεύδεσι μύθοις ἀλόχου πεισθεὶς (Believing the unproved accusations of [his] wife) and for οὔτε πίστιν οὔτε μάντεων ὅπα/ ἔμεινας, οὐκ ἤλεγξας, οὐ χρόνῳ μακρῶν/ σκέψιν παρέσχες (Not waiting for proof, augury, or a thorough examination, nor allowing the matter to be revealed by time) [1289; 1321-3]. Artemis is disgusted by Theseus’ unnatural act of filicide but she lays equal blame on the sudden and irresponsible outburst that causes Theseus to do it. According to ancient Greek and Roman cultures, this emotional impulsiveness is a feminine characteristic.⁴⁶ Female identities in Greek tragedy tend to be unstable, emotional and vindictive. When the tragic male takes on these characteristics he becomes “recognizably female.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Mayer 2002, 45.

⁴⁷ Cawthorn 2008, 9.

A similar scene plays out in Seneca's tragedy. After Phaedra merely hints at violence committed against her body and produces Hippolytus' sword as proof, Theseus immediately enacts one of Poseidon's curses [945-7]:

*En perge donum triste, regnator freti!
Non cernat ultra lucidum Hippolytus diem
Adeatque manes iuvenis iratos patri.*

Execute this sad rite, Ruler of the sea!
Let Hippolytus gaze upon this bright day no longer,
And in youth let him go to the ghosts angry with his father.

Roland Mayer points out that "by Roman standards, Theseus' action in cursing his son to death was outrageous; a Roman father would have needed to seek the advice of a family council, and anyway no prudent man would act so drastically on hearing an unsupported charge of rape."⁴⁸ Theseus' actions go against the Roman notion of *virtus*. Again the disapproval lies as much in the rashness of the imprecation as much as its result. Seneca portrays Theseus' filicide as more wicked and cruel than Medea's since Theseus' decision is impulsive, thoughtless, and against Roman law while Medea is wracked by uncertainty and painfully contemplates her decision over time.

Although the feminization of Theseus appears in both Greek and Roman literature, it is only emphasized visually in Roman art. Like most Greek heroes, Theseus' iconography in Greek art tends to focus on his courageous deeds. There are countless images of Theseus' adventures and exploits, but this is not the case in Roman art. In the Roman artistic tradition, images of Theseus are not as frequent and when the tragic myth is depicted the scene often concentrates on interaction between Phaedra and Hippolytus.

⁴⁸ 2002, 62.

A sarcophagus from the Museo Nazionale Romano is an exception and serves as a prime example of Roman iconography highlighting Theseus' feminization (figure 14). The scene illustrates an emotional Theseus, who has just received troubling news from the servant to the left.⁴⁹ Theseus brings his right hand to his face in a gesture of distress. His posture grants further insight into his emotional state as he looks to be nearly falling off his stool, propping himself up with his left hand while his foot dangles off the podium. Furthermore, the heavy drapery and excessive folds of fabric mirror that of the women in the scene, not the men who display either heroic nudity or shorter garments. Theseus' posture, distress, and drapery parallel that of his wife Phaedra on the opposite end of the scene.

Hippolytus

Hippolytus is a fascinating and complex character in both Euripides and Seneca. I argue that his literary evolution resembles that of the tragic women I have discussed rather than the men. In Euripides, Hippolytus is difficult to identify with. He is arrogant, stubborn in his beliefs and although he is not deserving of his tragic fate it is not unreasonable that there is divine retribution for his insolent blasphemy. His views concerning chastity (and his insistence on practicing it) are very feminine and contradict the views of a typical young man; Hippolytus is overtly feminine in that he adheres to the ideals of chastity required of virtuous Greek women. Hippolytus displays obstinacy in his refusal to honor Aphrodite and Artemis equally and to heed the warnings of the palace retainer.

⁴⁹ Zanker 1993, 348-9.

However, in Seneca, Hippolytus is not so arrogant and is portrayed as quite caring. At Hippolytus' first appearance in the play he immediately asks after the welfare of Phaedra and her children when he senses anxiety from the nurse [431-4]:

*Quid huc seniles fessa moliris gradus,
O fida nutrix, turbidam frontem gerens
Et maesta vultu? Sospes est certe parens
Sospesque Phaedra stirpis et geminae iugum?*

Why do you bring forth your tired and aged step,
Oh faithful nurse, wearing a troubled brow and worried expression?
Surely my father is safe, Phaedra is safe, and their two sons?

When Phaedra enters the scene and faints he dutifully collects her into his arms and begs to know what is troubling her. In the meantime he attempts to reassure his stepmother that if Theseus' absence is worrying her he will surely return home safely, and while he is gone Hippolytus will protect her and his half brothers [623-33]. Seneca's Hippolytus is more realistic and his ill-fated death more undeserved.⁵⁰

It is Seneca's version that plays out in Roman art but, unlike Jason and Theseus, Hippolytus is not feminized and it is actually his manliness that is emphasized. In the sarcophagus from the Vatican Museo Gregoriano Profano a semi-nude Hippolytus bids his stepmother farewell (figure 15). Hippolytus' *virtus* is highlighted in his sculpted muscles, chlamys, and the spear in his left hand. Hippolytus' horse stands ready indicating that he is about to embark on a hunt.⁵¹ The opposite side of the scene shows Hippolytus in the midst of the hunt. His masculinity is emphasized as he is depicted in the action of drawing back the spear in preparation for the kill. A female figure to the left, identified by Paul Zanker as *Virtus*, represents a personification and visual

⁵⁰ See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* bk. 15 for Hippolytus' side of the story.

⁵¹ Zanker 1993, 345.

confirmation of Hippolytus' courage.⁵² The side panels from the same sarcophagus also extol his virtues. Figure 16 shows Hippolytus making an offering to Artemis indicating his *pietas*—a key trait for any honorable Roman.⁵³ The right panel in figure 16 displays a male figure on horseback, believed to represent Hippolytus. Seeing Hippolytus again in the action of hunting draws attention to this athletic beauty and bravery. These traits are also present in the Roman Sarcophagus discussed earlier (figure 14). Hippolytus stands in the middle of the scene, his heroic nudity accentuating his beauty and muscular physique. He holds a spear and horse nearby indicating his manly courage.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The literary constructions of Phaedra, Theseus and Hippolytus each undergo a unique evolution in characterization between the Greek and Roman periods, which influences their iconography in Roman art. Phaedra shifts from a weak, vulnerable victim of her desires to a strong, outspoken woman who is not ashamed to address them. On the other hand, Roman authors choose to draw attention to Theseus' transgressions which damages his reputation, turning him from a pious king to a violent and selfish murderer. Like Medea and Phaedra, Hippolytus' character development is more favorable in Roman literature. He is portrayed as kind, concerned, and acceptably (not excessively) modest.

⁵² 1993, 346.

⁵³ Zanker 1993, 347.

⁵⁴ Zanker 1993, 348.

Chapter 3: The Case of Clytemnestra

Introduction

Analogous to Medea and Phaedra, the character of Clytemnestra also undergoes a literary evolution. In the case of Clytemnestra not only do several versions of the myth survive, which portray diverse versions of the Greek queen, but she is also featured in plays concerning her children Iphigenia, Electra, and Orestes. Clytemnestra's literary tradition extends from Homer to Seneca and in these nearly one thousand years her character evolves from an innocent queen manipulated by her husband's political rival into an equal accomplice in an impious crime. In this chapter I will examine four versions of Clytemnestra's tale in order to demonstrate that her character undergoes a transition between Greek and Roman literature, which culminates in her assumption of a more autonomous role in the Latin tradition.

In Greek tragedy Clytemnestra is depicted in two ways: either as Aegisthus' manipulated pawn or a grieving mother seeking vengeance for the death of her daughter. However in Seneca, Clytemnestra assumes qualities of the other tragic wives, Medea and Phaedra. As in his depiction of Phaedra, Seneca apportions Clytemnestra a more powerful voice than her Homeric and Aeschylean counterparts. Seneca ascribes her fatal deed to a thirst for power and position rather than revenge for the death of the innocent Iphigenia. The self-serving actions of Clytemnestra in Roman literature mark her as more autonomous and therefore more guilty and deserving of punishment.

Clytemnestra's varying motivations and differing levels of culpability are reflected in

Greek and Roman artistic traditions. The queen's dominant personality and increased level of autonomy are complemented by the feminization of her husband, the heroic Agamemnon.

Clytemnestra

I will begin with a summary of Clytemnestra's story and an investigation of the different literary traditions associated with the queen. Clytemnestra is the sister of Helen, wife of Agamemnon, and queen of Argos. Before embarking for Troy Agamemnon brings his daughter, Iphigenia, to Aulis on the pretense of marrying her to Achilles. However, his true intentions are revealed when he sacrifices her to Artemis in exchange for favorable winds for the Greek fleet. Clytemnestra is furious at this betrayal and takes Aegisthus, Agamemnon's cousin and political enemy, as a lover. The couple shares a mutual hatred for the king and plots his death upon his homecoming. The lovers' scheming appears to have succeeded; they kill Agamemnon and rule Argos for seven years. In the seventh year the couple is overthrown when Orestes, the exiled son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, returns home to avenge his father's murder by killing his mother and Aegisthus.

One of the earliest literary versions of Clytemnestra can be found in Homer's *Odyssey*. In the Homeric telling of the myth it is Aegisthus who is held responsible for the plot and murder. In book 1 Zeus addresses the matter to a divine assembly [1.35-1.43]:

ὥς καὶ νῦν Αἴγισθος ὑπὲρ μόρον Ἀτρεΐδαι
γῆμ' ἄλοχον μνηστήν, τὸν δ' ἔκτανε νοστήσαντα,
εἰδὼς αἰπὺν ὄλεθρον, ἐπεὶ πρό οἱ εἶπομεν ἡμεῖς,
Ἑρμείαν πέμψαντες, εὐσκοπὸν Ἀργεῖφόντην,

μήτ' αὐτὸν κτείνειν μήτε μνάσθαι ἄκοιτιν·
ἐκ γὰρ Ὀρέσταιο τίσις ἔσσεται Ἀτρεΐδαο,
ὁππότ' ἂν ἠβήσῃ τε καὶ ἥς ἱμεῖρεται αἷης...
νῦν δ' ἄθροα πάντ' ἀπέτεισε.

Take Aegisthus now, going above and beyond his share, he marries Agamemnon's wife and kills the man upon his return home, knowing it would mean utter ruin—since we warned him ourselves, having sent the Slayer Hermes to tell him not to kill the man and woo his wife: For vengeance will come from Orestes, Agamemnon's son, when he comes of age and wants his inheritance...now he is paid in full.

In book 3, Nestor discloses Clytemnestra's involvement in the crime to Telemachus

[3.264-6]:

Ἀγαμεμνονέην ἄλοχον θέλγεσκεν ἔπεσιν.
ἦ δ' ἦ τοι τὸ πρὶν μὲν ἀναίνετο ἔργον ἀεικές,
διὰ Κλυταιμνήστρη· φρεσὶ γὰρ κέχρητ' ἀγαθήσι·

...[Aegisthus] luring and bewitching the wife of Agamemnon; at first she refused the sordid affair, Noble Clytemnestra, for she was furnished with good sense...

Nestor also explains that, before leaving for Troy, Agamemnon appointed a trusted singer to protect his wife and it is the combination of these two factors that causes Clytemnestra to resist Aegisthus' advances. It is not until Aegisthus brutally murders this guard that the queen finally relents and willingly goes off with Aegisthus [3.265-72]. In Nestor's tale, Clytemnestra is culpable for willingly surrendering her virtue, but only after being manipulated and isolated by a power-hungry Aegisthus. In book 11, Agamemnon reveals his version of the events to Odysseus from the underworld. Agamemnon explains

[11.409-423]:

ἀλλὰ μοι Αἴγισθος τεύξας θανάτον τε μόρον τε
ἔκτα σὺν οὐλομένη ἀλόχῳ οἰκόνδε καλέσσας,
δειπνίσσας, ὥς τίς τε κατέκτανε βοῦν ἐπὶ φάτνῃ...
περὶ δ' ἄλλοι ἐταῖροι νωλεμέως κτείνοντο...
δάπεδον δ' ἅπαν αἵματι θῦεν.
οἰκτροτάτην δ' ἤκουσα ὅπα Πριάμοιο θυγατρὸς
Κασσάνδρης, τὴν κτεῖνε Κλυταιμνήστρη δολόμητις
ἄμφ' ἐμοί·

Aegisthus caused my death and destruction, he killed me with my own accursed wife, he called me to a feast at his house, then slaughtered me like some bull at a trough...and all around me my men were killed unceasingly...the floor steamed with blood. But I heard the most piteous cry from Cassandra, Priam's daughter. My treacherous wife Clytemnestra killed her right above my body.

While Agamemnon implicates Clytemnestra as an equal partner in the crime, Aegisthus is named as the actual cause of death—so it is likely that Agamemnon is identifying his cousin as his murderer where Clytemnestra is guilty of being an accomplice and for murdering Cassandra.

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* was produced around 458 BCE.⁵⁵ In this particular adaption, the playwright presents a unique version where Clytemnestra is given sole blame for Agamemnon's death. Clytemnestra's dominance is exposed immediately as the play begins when the watchman compares her to a man [10-11]:

ὥδε γὰρ κρατεῖ / γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ·

For she rules over the kingdom, this woman with a man's heart, awaiting news from Troy.

In Aeschylus it is the chorus (composed of the chief men of Argos) who indicates a motive for the queen's hatred of her husband by providing a detailed and heart-wrenching account of Iphigenia's murder [184-255]. The tale begins with a description of a violent storm threatening Agamemnon's entire fleet. The prophet, Calchas, declares that the only remedy is to sacrifice Iphigenia in the name of Artemis. Agamemnon is distraught and torn by the decision as he descends into madness [218-225]:

ἐπεὶ δ' ἀνάγκας ἔδω λέπαδνον
φρενὸς πνέων δυσσεβῆ τροπαίαν
ἄναγνον ἀνίερν, τόθεν
τὸ παντότολμον φρονεῖν μετέγνων·
βροτοὺς θρασύνει γὰρ αἰσχρομήτις

⁵⁵ Foley, 2001, vi.

τάλαινα παρακοπὰ πρωτοπήμων·
ἔτλα δ' οὖν θυτὴρ γενέσθαι θυγατρός

And when he sank into the yoke of Necessity, his spirit veered onto an impious path, unholy, unsanctified. Then he changed and his mind would dare anything. For impure thoughts embolden mortal men, causing frenzy, madness, and ruin. And so he dared to sacrifice his daughter...

Agamemnon is shown as heartless, cold, and selfish when he steels himself against his daughter's cries for mercy [228-236]:

λιτὰς δὲ καὶ κληδόνας πατρώιους
παρ' οὐδὲν αἰῶνα παρθένοιόν...
δίκαν χιμαίρας ὑπερθε βωμοῦ
πέπλοισι περιπετὴ παντὶ θυμῷ
προνοπῇ λαβεῖν ἀέρδην στόματός τε
καλλιπρώρου φυλακᾷ κατασχεῖν...

Her pleading, her desperate cries of 'Father,' her youth meant nothing...
He ordered her be held above the altar like a sacrificial goat. She fell grasping his robes, begging with all her heart, but he ordered her beautiful mouth be gagged...

This detailed and tragic illustration of Iphigenia's end serves as Clytemnestra's key motive to murder her husband.⁵⁶

Aeschylus is the only author who attributes Agamemnon's death to Clytemnestra alone, but the manner of the kings' demise (constricted by cloth in a bathtub then stabbed) is also unique in the Greek literary tradition. The actual act of killing does not occur on stage instead the audience receives a blow-by-blow account through Cassandra's visions. Cassandra, the prophetic daughter of king Priam, has been brought to Argos as Agamemnon's slave and war-prize. Although Cassandra represents a personal insult and possible political threat to Clytemnestra, the princess does not play a role in the queen's decision to kill her husband. Cassandra describes the murder [1115-1130]:

⁵⁶ Zanker, 2004, 374.

ἡ δίκτυόν τί γ' Ἴδου·
ἀλλ' ἄρκυς ἡ ξύνευνος, ἡ ξυναιτία
φόνου...ἰδοὺ ἰδοὺ...ἐν πέπλοισιν
μελαγκέρῳ λαβοῦσα μηχανήματι
τύπτει· πίτνει δ' <ἐν> ἐνύδρῳ τεύχει.
δολοφόνου λέβητος τύχαν σοι λέγω.

A mesh of Death. A net, it shares the bed, it shares the stain of blood...Look!
Look!...having caught him in conniving robes she strikes with a black horn. He falls into
the water. He is murdered in his bath I tell you.

In lines 1372-94 Clytemnestra admits to the murder, explaining how she entrapped Agamemnon in a robe and stabbed him three times.⁵⁷ Through her visions, Cassandra knows that she is Clytemnestra's next victim and willingly walks into the palace to face her death [1322-30].

Clytemnestra defends her actions to the chorus, who accuse her of adultery and murder [1399-1443]. She points out that Agamemnon is the true adulterer since he took Chryseis, Briseis, and finally Cassandra as mistresses. She maintains that she did not commit murder, rather exacted justice for her daughter's death. The chorus charges Aegisthus with being a coward for letting Clytemnestra fulfill the deed alone [1633-5]. It is clear that in Aeschylus' tragedy, the plotting and enactment of the murder lay solely with Clytemnestra and, although she is completely guilty of the impious crime, the queen is also a grieving mother who understandably seeks retribution for the loss of an innocent child.

Another author who represented the tragic myth and a contemporary of Aeschylus is Ion of Chios. Although Ion's play only survives in fragments, R. J. Tarrant believes

⁵⁷ For more on the debate over the nature of Clytemnestra's murder weapon (a sword or double-axe) see Prag 1991.

that what survives indicates that the playwright may have “returned to the Homeric account of Agamemnon’s death.”⁵⁸ He describes a possible scene where Aegisthus and Clytemnestra plot Agamemnon’s murder together and, after the crime, Aegisthus and/or Clytemnestra threaten Electra with torture. Tarrant identifies Ion’s non-Aeschylean qualities as a potential influence on Seneca.⁵⁹

The mid-third century BCE Roman republican writer Livius Andronicus may have borrowed from the tradition of Ion in his play *Aegisthus*.⁶⁰ Although the remnants of Livius Andronicus’ tragedy are fragmentary, surviving excerpts indicate that the work continued the tradition of deviating from Aeschylus’ adaptation.⁶¹ As in the Homeric version, Livius Andronicus places the location of Agamemnon’s murder at a banquet [fr. 9-10; 11]:

*... in sedes conlocat se regias;
Clutaemestra iuxtim, tertias natae occupant.*

Ipsus se in terram saucius fligit cadens.

He establishes himself upon the royal chair;
Clytemnestra is next to him, their daughters sit third in rank.

He fell down wounded, casting himself upon the earth.

Unfortunately, the extant fragments do not identify by whose hand Agamemnon fell.

Fragments 12-13 describe a scene where Electra, horrified by what has occurred at the banquet, has sought refuge in a temple but Aegisthus orders her removal:

⁵⁸ 1976, 10-11.

⁵⁹ 1976, 10-13.

⁶⁰ Another Roman version of the myth exists dating to the mid-second century or early first century BCE attributed to Accius. What survives of Accius’ tragedy is even more fragmentary than Livius Andronicus and according to Tarrant “no fragment of Accius’ *Clytemnestra* is incompatible with that can be known about Livius’ *Aegisthus*.” (1976, 13).

⁶¹ Tarrant, 1976, 10-11.

*Quin, quod parere mihi vos maiestas mea
procat, toleratis temploque hanc deducitis?*

Do you intend to support what my majesty demands and lead this woman from the temple?

This extant scene appears to display a new development in the tradition of the story. In Aeschylus the play ends with Aegisthus and Clytemnestra bickering with the leader of the chorus rather than threatening her young daughter.

Seneca's *Agamemnon* is quite fascinating in that he chose to borrow from all of the various storylines of his predecessors, which produces a complex and layered characterization of Clytemnestra. When the audience is first introduced to the queen, unlike in Aeschylus, she is immediately portrayed as unsure and wavering in her decision to seek revenge on her husband [108-9]: *Quid, segnis anime, tuta consilia expetis?/ Quid fluctuaris? Clausa iam melior via est* (Why sluggish soul do you seek safe counsel? Why do you waver? Already the better way is closed). Clytemnestra attempts to convince herself to commit the deed [116-121]:

*Tecum ipsa nunc evolve femineos dolos,
quod ulla coniunx perfida atque impos sui
amore caeco, quod novercales manus
ausae, quod ardens impia virgo face
Phasiaca fugiens regna Thessalica trabe:
ferrum, venena.*

Release now within yourself feminine wiles—That which any faithless wife, possessed with blind passion, that which step-mother's hands have dared, what she dared, the maiden burning with impious passion, she who fled her Phasian kingdom in a Thessalian ship; [these women who] dared sword, dared poison.

Clytemnestra's pep talk clearly references both Phaedra and Medea. The Greek queen aims to imitate two of the most infamous murderesses in history.

Like the Roman version of Phaedra found in Ovid and Seneca, Clytemnestra is not at all afraid to acknowledge the sins of her husband, which mark him as deserving of death. When speaking to the nurse (who, like Medea's nurse, attempts to calm the queen's rage to no avail), Clytemnestra calls attention to the fact that she has essentially been abandoned as a widow for ten years [156], and then reveals the anguish she feels over the sacrifice and death of her daughter [158-175]. In Aeschylus, it is the chorus who narrates the tragic sacrifice that preceded the war, but Seneca's audience hears the tale directly from Clytemnestra's mouth, which exposes her as a mother in mourning. Clytemnestra continues by highlighting the insults she incurs through Agamemnon's three famous female spoils of war and points out the irony and selfishness of his actions when his prizes are threatened and his pride wounded [175-192]. Clytemnestra calls out Agamemnon's contradictory actions: while the king willingly carried out Calchas' prophecy to sacrifice their daughter in order to save the Greek fleet, when a plague descended upon the Greek camp at Troy and Calchas ordered the return of Agamemnon's prized Chryseis, the king refused—a decision that caused the death of many Greek soldiers. Furthermore, *neve desertus foret/ a paelice umquam barbara caelebs torus* (lest his lonely couch ever be empty of some barbaric mistress) [184-5] he steals Achilles' prize Briseis, causing Achilles to withdraw from battle and triggering the death of even more Greek warriors. In recalling Agamemnon's grievous and offensive actions Clytemnestra strengthens her will for revenge.

However, Clytemnestra's determination is not restored until Aegisthus enters the scene, urging her not to abandon their plot. In order to persuade her, he plays on her

insecurities [244-5]: *Credis aut speras tibi/ Agamemnonis fidele coniugium?* (Do you believe or hope that Agamemnon honors his marriage vows to you?). Aegisthus implores her to consider how prideful Agamemnon was before and during the war, when he was simply a Greek king, what can she expect when he returns as victor and conqueror of Troy [245-53]? He attempts to frighten Clytemnestra in regards to her royal position—even if she is willing to share Agamemnon with Cassandra how does she know Cassandra will be willing as well? He declares that mistresses are never happy with their positions and are always looking for ways to rise above their stations [254-59]. Seneca's Clytemnestra is similar to her counterpart in Homer in that she wavers in her decisions and is manipulated and coerced by her lover (although Homer never attributes a specific justification for Clytemnestra's involvement).

The manner of Agamemnon's death combines Aeschylean and Homeric aspects. Upon their arrival in Argos, Cassandra is openly hostile to Agamemnon [782-800], as opposed to the Homeric version of a pitiful, young girl who fearfully clings to Agamemnon's dying body [11.421-4]. Rather than being afraid, Cassandra rejoices at the visions of her captor's death [867-71]:

*Res agitur intus magna, par annis decem.
 eheu quid hoc est? anime, consurge et cape
 pretium furoris: uicimus uicti Phryges.
 bene est, resurgis Troia; traxisti iacens
 parens Mycenae, terga dat uictor tuus!*

A great deed has been committed within, equal to ten years of war. Ah! What's this? Spirit, rise up and take the reward of your madness—the conquered Phrygians have conquered! It's well! Troy has risen; Father, by your death you have dragged down Mycenae, your conqueror gives his life!

In lines 875-909 Cassandra describes the fatal scene. Agamemnon sits down to a celebratory banquet, surrounded by guests, wearing luxurious Phrygian garments. Clytemnestra asks him to don a robe that she has woven in his honor; as he puts on the garment he is caught up in the voluminous folds of fabric. This is when Aegisthus strikes *haurit trementi semivir dextra latus,/nec penitus egit* (with trembling right hand the half-man stabs at his side, but has not driven deep) [890-1]. As Agamemnon attempts to escape [887-902]:

*Armat bipenni Tyndaris dextram furens,
qualisque ad aras colla taurorum popa
designat oculis antequam ferro petat,
sic huc et illuc impiam librat manum.
habet! peractum est! pendet exigua male
caput amputatum parte...*

Raving [Clytemnestra] arms herself with two-headed axe and, just as at the altar the priest marks the neck of the bull with his eyes before he strikes with this sword, so now her impious hand aims. He has it! It is done! The partially severed head hangs from an unlucky part.

Although Aegisthus commits the first assault, the strike is a half-hearted effort barely wounding the king, and it is Clytemnestra who steps up to deliver the fatal blow.

Throughout Seneca's play Clytemnestra's motives become increasingly questionable. She begins by naming the sacrifice of her daughter as the cause of her anger and reason for vengeance—a sentiment that is identifiable and, although impious, not completely blameworthy or dishonorable. However, she goes on to explain her annoyance with Agamemnon's mistresses, revealing her true fear of losing her position of power. The final scene of the play supports this notion. Clytemnestra's daughter has sought refuge at an altar with Cassandra when the queen enters and demands to learn Orestes' whereabouts. Electra spars with her mother, saying she sent her brother away to

safety, and refuses to reveal the location, she also reprimands her mother for her role in the violent murder. Clytemnestra is outraged and threatens her daughter's life [971]: *morieris hodie* (You will die today). Aegisthus joins his royal lover and continues to terrorize Electra with threats of imprisonment and torture if she does not cooperate [986-95]. Electra refuses to betray her brother and is dragged from the altar to face her punishment [996-1000]:

*Abripite, famuli, monstrum et avectam procul
ultra Mycenae ultimo in regni angulo
vincite saeptam nocte tenebroso specus...*

Slaves, take away this monstrosity. Take her far from Mycenae, to the remotest corner of the realm and chain her, wrapped in the gloomy darkness of her cell...

Clytemnestra's cruelty is not finished as she turns her wrath to Cassandra.

Seneca's Cassandra is unique in her candid hatred of Agamemnon and is ecstatic at his death. Cassandra tries to convince Clytemnestra that Agamemnon was their mutual enemy and longs to tell the people of Troy that [1004-11]:

*Mille ductorem ducum...
perisse dono feminae— stupro, dolo...
nihil moramur...quin grates ago.
iam, iam iuvat uixisse post Troiam, iuvat.*

The leader of a thousand leaders...was destroyed by the gift of a woman—by adultery, by guile...I do not hesitate but give you thanks. Now, now it is sweet to have outlived Troy, it is delightful.

Clytemnestra ignores Cassandra's pleas and kills the priestess of Apollo before his altar.

Clytemnestra identifies the death of Iphigenia as the reason for her revenge so it is ironic that she ends up setting out to injure her other two living children, Electra and Orestes. These actions undermine her defense of being a grieving mother and point to the fact that she is actually concerned with securing power for herself and Aegisthus.

Furthermore, while it is understandable that Clytemnestra hates Cassandra because she fears being set aside for the Trojan princess, once Agamemnon is dead Cassandra no longer possesses a threat as a political rival. She is simply a prize, a slave of war kidnapped from her defeated homeland. It makes sense that Cassandra would detest Agamemnon as much as Clytemnestra, so her death seems unnecessary. In murdering Cassandra, Clytemnestra exposes that her true intentions are self-motivated.

Therefore throughout the Greek and Roman traditions Clytemnestra's character undergoes a transition from a lonely wife seduced by her husband's political rival, to a grieving mother seeking fatal revenge, and finally to a queen willing to do anything in order to secure power for herself and her lover.

Clytemnestra in Art: Depicting Revenge

The varied versions of Clytemnestra's character in literature make it difficult to construct a sustained visual narrative from Greek and Roman iconography. However, it is possible to see a reflection of this diverse literary tradition in Greek art where scenes of Clytemnestra tend to illustrate a blending of different storylines. Meanwhile the Senecan version of the queen, a woman who acts of her own volition on behalf of her own self interests, can be identified in scenes on Roman sarcophagi, which highlight the autonomous aspect of her character.

The few extant scenes of Agamemnon's murder depict similar images of the crime. A late seventh century BCE relief plaque from Gortyn portrays a seated Agamemnon, draped in fabric, being attacked by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus who loom

over the defenseless king (figure 17).⁶² The plaque is unique in that it actually depicts Aeschylus' mid-fifth century version of events for which there is no surviving, contemporary equivalent. Aeschylus' tragedy is the earliest extant rendition where fabric acts as a weapon and Clytemnestra is the primary agent of the crime. Only one example of Agamemnon's murder survives from fifth century BCE Attic pottery, a red-figure krater by the Dokimasia Painter (figure 18).⁶³ Side A of the krater illustrates the murder of Agamemnon. Aegisthus grasps the head of the king and attacks him with a sword. The king is helpless, naked, and constrained by a clingy, sheer fabric. Two women rush towards the main action of the scene from either side, Clytemnestra from the left and Cassandra from the right.⁶⁴ Both images demonstrate a mixture of storylines. Figure 18 could be argued to represent aspects of Aeschylus' version due to the prominent role of fabric as a weapon and because Agamemnon is nude—insinuating that perhaps a bath was involved. But it is Aegisthus who is the instigator of the crime and delivers the fatal strike while Clytemnestra looks on simply as an accomplice. Classical Greek images of Agamemnon's death show either a joint murder or Aegisthus committing the deed alone. There are no known representations of Clytemnestra carrying out the crime on her own.

Images of Orestes' vengeance on Clytemnestra and Aegisthus shed further light regarding the level of culpability of the couple. The majority of Greek images illustrating Orestes' revenge show him killing Aegisthus,⁶⁵ which may reflect that in Greek opinion

⁶² LIMC, 1981, vol. 1.

⁶³ Bernal, 1997, 94.

⁶⁴ Bernal, 1997, 95-102.

⁶⁵ Bernal, 1997, 99. Furthermore, 10 of 11 Greek images in the LIMC depict Orestes killing Aegisthus. 1981, vol. 1, pt. 1.

Aegisthus was more blameworthy. This would not be surprising since the majority of surviving literature does not attribute the deed to Clytemnestra alone (in this aspect Aeschylus is unique). Side B of the Dokimasia krater is a key piece of evidence for this tradition (figure 19). Orestes, dressed as a soldier, attacks Aegisthus seated on the usurped throne. Orestes' military garb highlights his virtue and is in stark contrast to Aegisthus' luxurious garments. Aegisthus holds a lyre in his left hand—an instrument associated with erotic powers of seduction.⁶⁶ It is a significant detail that the artist chose to execute Aegisthus with this musical instrument since its symbolism seems to allude to the Homeric characterization of the traitor, a violent and power-hungry royal usurper who seduces and manipulates Agamemnon's wife.

However, there are a few scenes that may show Orestes seeking vengeance on his mother. One of the earliest depictions of the matricide is on the middle register of a bronze tripod leg from Olympia dating to 570 BCE (figure 20). If this identification is correct, the image shows Orestes in the act of stabbing Clytemnestra, while Aegisthus flees to the right.⁶⁷ Another instance of Clytemnestra's death can be found on a mid-fourth century BCE Paestan red-figure amphora (figure 21).⁶⁸ Orestes wields a sword as he looms menacingly over his supplicating mother. Clytemnestra grasps her exposed left breast, behind her a Fury holds out a serpent—possibly a reference to Clytemnestra's prophetic dream in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* when the queen has visions of suckling a snake, foreshadowing her impending death.

⁶⁶ Bernal, 1997, 100-2.

⁶⁷ LIMC, 1981, vol. 1.

⁶⁸ LIMC, 1991, vol. 6.

In contrast to the variations of Greek iconography, all extant Roman representations (mainly sarcophagi) illustrate Orestes enacting the death of both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.⁶⁹ According to Paul Zanker, Orestes sarcophagi can be divided into two groups: Orestes avenging his father's murder, and events after the retribution including his escapades in Tauris.⁷⁰ A mid-second century CE sarcophagus, currently housed in the Vatican Museum, exemplifies the first group (figure 22). The narrative reads from left to right and begins with Orestes and his comrade Pylades startled at the sight of Agamemnon's ghost.⁷¹ The center of the panel shows a violent scene of murder; Orestes has just killed his mother and her lover. Aegisthus lies toppled over on his head, the usurped throne crushed beneath his twisted body. Clytemnestra's lifeless body lies carelessly on the ground with breasts exposed. The right side of the panel shows Orestes plagued by the Furies—foreshadowing the arduous journey that lies ahead.

Although scenes of Orestes' matricide are far from non-existent before Seneca, in the Roman period the crime becomes the standard form of iconography associated with the myth. I propose that this transition is linked to Clytemnestra's autonomy in Seneca. The fact that in Seneca's play Clytemnestra's motivations are revealed as increasingly selfish, intended to elevate the position of herself and her lover, may indicate that the Roman audience perceived her as more guilty and therefore more deserving of fatal punishment in art.

⁶⁹ The majority of which post-date Seneca.

⁷⁰ Zanker, 2004, 375.

⁷¹ Zanker, 2004, 376-8.

Agamemnon

Like his heroic, male companions in tragedy, Jason and Theseus, Agamemnon's virility also undergoes a feminization in the Aeschylean and Senecan adaptations. I propose that the appearance of a feminized Agamemnon is not a coincidence but directly related to the identity of his murderer and the manner of his death. These two tragedians provide the only two surviving accounts where Clytemnestra is the primary murderer and textiles play a key role in the king's death.

First, I will explore the significance of employing fabric as a murder weapon. It is well known that textiles represent the realm of women. Spinning fibers into yarn and weaving yarn into fabric was a chief household occupation and this crucial aspect of women's work was practiced by females of all ages regardless of social status. All women, rich or poor, displayed their virtue and value through their skill in weaving.⁷² Homer is notorious for his use of weaving as a motif and a symbol not only for female virtue but also for female cunning. In book 2 of *The Odyssey* it is revealed that Penelope declared that she would choose a suitor and remarry as soon as she finished weaving a burial shroud for her father-in-law. In order to buy time for the return of Odysseus Penelope wove by day and tore out the weaving by night. This continued for three years until one of her servant girls finally betrayed her scheme to the suitors. Through this narrative Homer highlights the link between textiles and the world of women. Penelope's shroud symbolizes not simply her chastity but also her cleverness, as she uses her women's work to fool men. In this Clytemnestra is similar to the virtuous Penelope—

⁷² See Barber, 1995.

they are both elite women who possess the required skill of weaving and utilize their craft to manipulate men and achieve their desires—but Clytemnestra takes Penelope’s ruse to the extreme by using cloth as a deadly weapon.⁷³

In Aeschylus, Agamemnon is immediately feminized upon his victorious homecoming when he is coerced by his wife to walk on precious fabrics [908-9]: *δμωαί, τί μέλλεθ’, αἷς πέσταλται τέλος/ πέδον κελεύθου στορνύναι πετάσμασιν;* (Women, why do you delay? You have been ordered to strew the ground of his path with tapestries!). Agamemnon attempts to resist [918-19, 921-2]: *καὶ τᾶλλα μὴ γυναικὸς ἐν τρόποις ἐμὲ/ ἄβρυνε...μηδ’ εἴμασι στρώσας’ ἐπίφθονον πόρον/ τίθει* (Do not treat me like a woman...do not bring envy on me by strewing my path with garments) but, despite his protestations, Clytemnestra insists that Agamemnon tread on the fine fabrics [943]: *πιθοῦ, †κράτος μέντοι πάρες γ’† ἐκὼν ἐμοί.* (Obey! The power is still yours if you surrender to me willingly). Agamemnon eventually yields to his wife and Clytemnestra emerges as the dominant partner.

Agamemnon is further feminized when fabric serves as a tool for his death. In *The Libation Bearers* Orestes and Electra lament this particularly humiliating aspect of their father’s murder [492-4]:

Ηλ. μέμνησο δ’ ἀμφίβληστρον ὡς ἐκαίνισας.
Ορ. πέδαις γ’ ἀχαλκεῦτοισι θηρευθεῖς, πάτερ.
Ηλ. αἰσχρῶς τε βουλευτοῖσιν ἐν καλύμμασιν.

Electra: Remember how they fashioned a net.
Orestes: And you were caught in fetters not even made of metal, Father.
Electra: In that shameless veil which they plotted.

⁷³ Battistella notes a similarity between Medea and Clytemnestra: “Medea kills Creusa with a gown and crown and Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon with a similarly innocuous object” (201).

Whether the textile Clytemnestra used was a thinly woven, sheer cloth or more of a hunting net is unclear and irrelevant. Either way the textile acts to emasculate Agamemnon's character and, if the cloth was closer to a net, to dehumanize him as well.⁷⁴ Bernal underlines the duality of the weapon, "a luxurious veil woven by female hands, enveloping like a fishing net and immobilizing like a hunting net."⁷⁵ In Seneca, while Clytemnestra and Aegisthus plot Agamemnon's murder mutually (in fact at times Clytemnestra wavers and must be convinced to commit the deed by her lover) when the conspiracy is enacted it is the queen who takes the dominant role and delivers the blow that kills her husband. Seneca directly attributes Agamemnon's death to Clytemnestra so it is not surprising that textiles play a key role in the king's demise as well [881-3].

This feminization is also visible in art and particularly in Roman renditions of the tragedy. Like the previous two heroes I have discussed, the majority of Agamemnon's iconography in Greek culture focuses on his masculine and adventurous exploits, with a myriad of exempla from his deeds in Troy.⁷⁶ Only two images survive that illustrate his treacherous death by fabric and these scenes seem to emphasize humiliation and dehumanization rather than feminization. However, in Roman art Agamemnon is often dressed in a feminine manner, draped head to toe in excessive folds of fabric (much like Theseus). In figure 22, the ghost of Agamemnon appears on the left side of the sarcophagus wearing loose, flowing garments that cover his downcast gaze. Similar iconography is visible in figure 23. Agamemnon stands on the left side of the episode

⁷⁴ Komar, 2003, 34-5; Bernal, 1997, 96-7.

⁷⁵ 1997, 97.

⁷⁶ 39 of 49 Agamemnon images in the LIMC depict the deeds of the Trojan cycle. 1981, vol. 1, pt. 1: 259.

turning his back to the pleading cries of his daughter, Iphigenia. Again, the king is completely draped in fabric with his hair covered and his face hidden by his hand in a gesture of shame and distress. In both of these cases Agamemnon is veiled just like a woman and his garments resemble those of a virtuous matron or even a young bride.

I acknowledge that it could be argued that Agamemnon's garments are more sacred than feminine; that a ghost at a tomb and royal presence at a sacrifice would require certain ritualistic costume. However, I disagree with this interpretation considering the significance of fabric to the plot of both Aeschylus' and Seneca's tragedies along with the fact that, in figure 23, the garments of the priest show more skin, face, and hair than the depictions of Agamemnon.

Conclusion

Like Medea and Phaedra, Clytemnestra assumes a more autonomous role in Latin literature. Despite the fact that Aeschylus' portrayal of the queen as the key conspirator is unique in the mythological tradition, no contemporary visual evidence survives that definitively illustrates Clytemnestra killing her husband. In refusing to depict Clytemnestra as a murderess, Greek artists take away her power by ignoring the success of her fatal plot. On the other hand, Seneca illustrates a depth to the queen's character as a grieving mother and shows a wavering in her scheming constitution. However, in the end, it is revealed that Clytemnestra is less driven by rage at the loss of her daughter than her thirst for power and vengeance. Clytemnestra fearlessly eradicates her enemies, threatens the lives of her surviving children (despite naming the death of Iphigenia as her

main motivation), brutally kills Cassandra, and strips her husband Agamemnon not only of his life, but also of his masculinity.

Conclusion

Literary and artistic evidence shows that there was a significant shift in how Medea, Phaedra, and Clytemnestra were portrayed and perceived from the Greek to the Roman periods. Fragmentary evidence indicates that, before Euripides, Medea was not notorious for killing her children. Visual evidence from the Archaic period supports this theory by highlighting her divine attributes. Iconography from several lekythoi depicts Medea flanked by snakes, which implies chthonic and apotropaic connotations. After Euripides' version of the myth was produced in 431 BCE, Medea became known for committing infanticide as an act of revenge against her husband. This trend is reflected in art: after 431 BCE Medea is usually shown in the act of murdering the two boys or fleeing in her chariot having just accomplished the violent deed.

Seneca, whose work is the most complete extant version of his time, adheres to Euripides' general storyline but approaches it (and Medea) in a different way. The author constructs a much more sympathetic Medea and forces the audience to feel her anguish and betrayal. Seneca draws attention to Medea's abandonment and the confusion she feels about how to move forward with her life. Seneca's Medea ultimately kills her children, but the story focuses on her precarious mental state and indecisiveness in carrying out the deed. Post-Senecan art illustrates this version of a conflicted Medea. She is never shown in the midst of infanticide, only contemplating the crime and/or fleeing afterwards.

When considering Medea, is it important to keep in mind that her character was not always associated with unspeakable, violent acts. Before 431 BCE, Medea was notorious for warding off evil rather than creating it.

Phaedra's shift in characterization between the Greek and Roman periods is no less dramatic than Medea's. In Euripides' play Phaedra is forlorn, disturbed by her feelings for Hippolytus. She is physically sick with love for her stepson and is so frail that she can barely support herself. Phaedra is a pawn of the divine, consumed by illicit love so that Aphrodite can seek revenge on Hippolytus for his blasphemy. This is manifested in contemporary Greek art where Phaedra is portrayed as so weak that she can scarcely hold up her head; her status as victim is revealed in her downcast gaze and the presence of Eros. The nurse attending Phaedra represents the queen's lack of agency in Euripides, since it is the nurse who discloses Phaedra's feelings to Hippolytus, acting as the instigator of events.

Roman authors render a completely different version of Phaedra. In Ovid's *Heroides*, Phaedra writes a letter to Hippolytus; in it she acknowledges her desires and seizes control of her fate. This outspoken Phaedra also appears in Seneca's play, *Hippolytus/Phaedra*. One key deviation from Euripides is that, in Seneca, Phaedra is essentially an abandoned wife—lending credence to her passions for her stepson. Phaedra boldly declares her feelings to Hippolytus, taking control of the situation and accepting her desires instead of being ashamed of them. It is this brazen Phaedra that Roman artists choose to depict. Phaedra shows strength and control in that she holds her head straight up and looks directly at the viewer. Remarkably, Phaedra and Hippolytus

are often shown together; these scenes expose Phaedra's agency and allude to the adaptations of Ovid and Seneca. Phaedra's character transforms from weak and feeble to strong and outspoken; in Greek works she is a victim and pawn, but in Roman traditions she emerges as the author of her fate.

In the most well-known rendering of Clytemnestra's story, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the queen is notorious for murdering her husband in a bathtub, but in the mythological tradition she was not always guilty of this crime. In the Homeric version of the tale, Clytemnestra is manipulated into an affair by Aegisthus and, according to *Agamemnon* from the underworld, it is Aegisthus who commits the act. Aeschylus' tragedy represents the first extant literary example that identifies Clytemnestra as the sole murderer and fabric as the weapon of choice. However, surviving images dating before Aeschylus depict fabric as a weapon while those after the playwright's production of the play show Aegisthus committing the murder (never Clytemnestra). The majority of contemporary Classical Greek images show Orestes taking revenge on Aegisthus, although a few exist of Orestes committing matricide. This indicates that in some versions of the myth the queen possessed a level of culpability, but overall Aegisthus was considered responsible for the crime.

Seneca attributes the murder to both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra in his version of *Agamemnon*, but does not apportion equal blame since it is Clytemnestra who delivers the fatal blow to the king. This is reflected in Roman art especially on sarcophagi where Clytemnestra is always on the receiving end of Orestes' vengeance, indicating her agency in committing the crime.

The circle of transformations of these three powerful women is completed by the feminization of their husbands. While this feminization appears similarly in Greek and Roman literature, it is only illustrated visually in Roman art. Despite the fact that each of these men was overcome by their wives, Greek art celebrates their heroic adventures, emphasizing their masculinity. Roman artists see the duality in the personae of these men and express their feminization through costume and mannerisms.

This paper has revealed fresh findings into the characterizations and motivations of these three remarkable women. Despite or perhaps because of the abundance of evidence, there is still more work to be done. A closer examination of the specific archaeological contexts of these artworks, especially Roman frescoes, may shed even more light onto how these women were received.

Figures

Figure 1

Black Figure Lekythos, British Museum, 4-17.1, 530 BCE



Figure 2

Apulian Volute Krater, Underworld Painter, 330 BCE, Munich, 3296

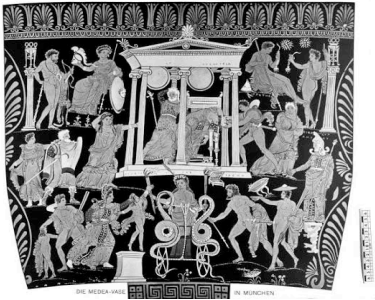


Figure 3

Medea's Contemplation Atrium, House of Dioscuri, Pompeii, 64-90 CE, 4th Style



Figure 4

The Death of Creusa, Berlin Sarcophagus, 140-150 CE



Figure 5

Medea fleeing in her chariot, circa 400 BCE



Figure 6

Apulian Krater, British Museum, Mid-fourth c BCE



Figure 7

Fresco, Pompeii, House of Jason, Room E, 1st c CE



Figure 8

Fresco, Pompeii, British Museum, 20-60 CE



Figure 9

Silver cup, Seuso Treasure, late fourth-early fifth c CE



Figure 10

“Fedra” fresco, Vatican Library, late second-early third c CE



Figure 11

Mosaic, Paphos, House of Dionysus, second c CE



Figure 12

Fresco, Herculaneum, 1st c CE



26759 - NAPOLI - Ippolito e Fedra - Affresco di Ercolano - Museo Nazionale - Ritr. Int. - Anderson - Roma

Figure 13
Fresco, Pompeii, 1st c CE



Figure 14
Sarcophagus from Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano



Figure 15
Vatican Sarcophagus, Museo Gregoriano Profano

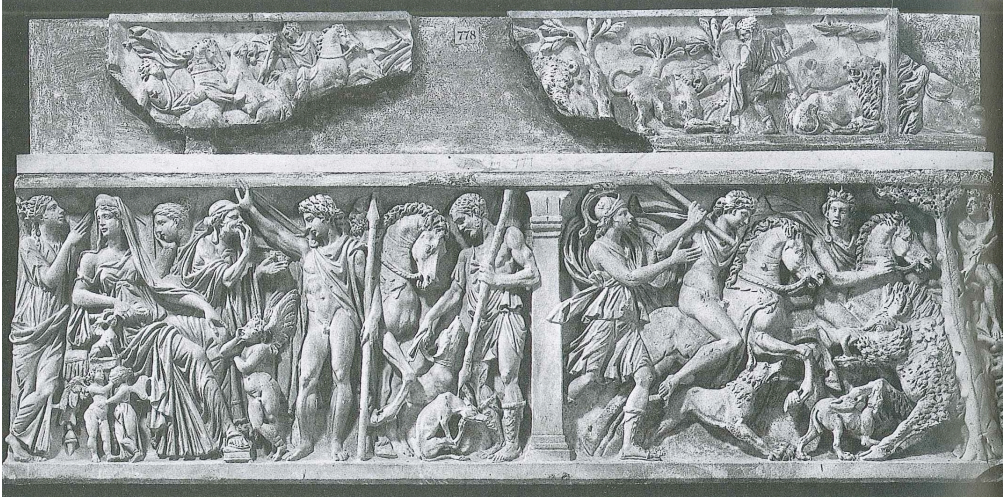


Figure 16
Vatican Sarcophagus, Side Panels



Figure 17
Terra cotta relief plaque, Gortyn, Seventh century BCE



Figure 18

Red-figure Attic krater, Dokimasia Painter, Side A, Mid-fifth century BCE



Figure 19

Red-figure Attic krater, Dokimasia Painter, Side B, Mid-fifth century BCE



Figure 20

Bronze Tripod leg, Olympia, 570 BCE



Figure 21

Paestan red-figure amphora, Mid-fourth century BCE



Figure 22

Roman sarcophagus, Mid-second century CE



Figure 23

Roman wall painting, House of the Tragic Poet, Pompeii, First century CE



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